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## Islam and We

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Panel: Islam and We

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## Jagath Kumarasinge (Sri Lanka)

### Islam and We

*Aubowan.* It is our duty to speak on the given topic "Islam and we" to this august assembly, in your Mark Twain's country. This occasion is very precious, because I myself am a person never having before even stepped into a university, similar to a common unlettered Muslim trader standing with his commodities along a pavement in Sri Lanka. However, I am not a trader by profession. There is a reason to call your USA Mark Twain's country, because in 1956 when the late Prime Minister S.W. R. D. Bandaranayake, captured the power in Sri Lanka, not by the bullet but by the ballot, a working correspondent in Colombo for Time Magazine, asked, "Now tell me Mr. Bandaranayake, what is your policy towards USA?" "How can I forget Mark Twain's country?" was the reply. Personally, I believe each person participating in this assembly is very precious: the young, the old, the middle aged and the other persons who are sitting here.

Regarding the given topic, what is meant by *we*? I suppose *we* mean, the others or the other communities in Sri Lanka. I belong to the majority, the Sinhala people, in Sri Lanka, by birth. Moreover, I myself am a Buddhist. In addition, what is meant by *Islam*? May we refer to the New Oxford Dictionary of English? Its definition is: "The religion of the Muslims. A monotheist faith regarded as revealed through Mohammed (Blessings and peace be upon him) as the prophet of Allah." So then Islam and We means for me, "the interactions and the intimacies that have taken place between us and the Muslims in Sri Lanka." It means the Muslim boys who were our classmates, who studied and played with us at the college; in addition, their parents, their kith and kin who knew that we were their children's friends, and exchanged a nod or a smile with us and inquired about us, while sitting within their shops, while we were walking along the streets. It means the Muslim football players we admired when we were lads; or their mutton curry, or *burijani*, which they send to our homes as a token of gift during their festival days on a *Ramazān* (Ramadan) day, on a day they celebrated prophet Mohammed's ( Blessings and peace be upon him) birthday. They never sent us a little portion on such occasions. They were great connoisseurs of food. The food allocated by the almighty Allah. They used to send us on such occasions large baskets full of delicious and fine smelling food.

May I ask you, is it a part of the Islamic generosity? We Sinhala Buddhists also entertain such generosity in Sri Lanka when we celebrate the *Wesak* festival—the occasion to which we are devoted each year in celebrating the birth, enlightenment, and the *Mahāparinibbana*, or the passing away of Buddha the Gauthama. On such days we cook food in very large quantities which we offer free to whomever walks along the streets, irrespective of their caste, religion, or whatever other differences.

I know Muslims of Sri Lanka admire this practice of ours as an act agreeable with their traditional belief of giving freely yet not attaching greedily to food or whatever other material stuffs. You may munch a packet of peanuts, however, by nature you are reluctant to offer a little out of it, to the person whom you meet on the street. It is nothing but sheer greediness of your innermost heart. Life is like that. Such matters happen due to the influence of Satan.

The Muslims call Satan *Iblis*. Greed is the quality of Satan. Satan's beautiful daughters performed a dance before Buddha the Gauthma even as he was about to enter the spiritual enlightenment. In Buddhist tradition he is the *Maraya*. Maraya brought on the dance to attempt

to influence Buddha the Gauthma to deviate from the path of truth. Maybe the dance of his daughters performed before the Buddha, who was then sitting under the Bo tree, would have been a captivating belly dance. The others could not shun it away; only the Blessed One.

Mr. K. was a one eyed retired prison officer. His wife was as old as he was. They were childless. They were Malay Muslims. As children, we were living with them, sharing a portion of their large bungalow as tenants with our parents. The bungalow stood amid a land with lots of tropical fruit trees, which extended ten acres. The couple was very kind to us children, my sister and me. There was a large star fruit tree in front of that bungalow, and a bench stood beneath the shade of that tree. I remember how we munched the green apple and lemon yellowish sweet star fruits. While sitting on that bench, my dad used to enjoy an occasional drink if things were all right. When Mr. K's cousins or the other males in the family visited them, Dad joined them for his occasional drink and for a charming chat. For Muslims it is prohibitive to consume liquor. For Buddhists the advice is also to not go for partaking of any kind of intoxicant. However, it is the very nature of life. Is happening is nothing but due to the influence of Satan. Satan muzzles men, women, and children irrespective of their status, age or religion. It is why the Muslims say during their prayers, *A'udhu billahi minash-shaitanir-rajim* (*I seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan*); and after that they say, *Bismillahir-rahmanir-rahim* (*In the name of God most merciful and compassionate*).

As teenagers, we used to cut school to bathe in a river. Once I was about to drown on such an occasion. A Muslim chum also was swimming with us during that great truancy, and luckily, the same friend extended a floating club on the river towards me. I was dragged on the club, and then again, started swimming to the shore of the river. The Muslim friend's name was Abdul Carder. In later life, he became an officer in the exercise department. A famous saint's name shines in the Islamic history. He is Abdul Carder Gelani. People even call him *The Rose of Baghdad*.

Once, years back, our family migrated to a new town, because dad wanted to earn more money in a company whose work he found easy. We did not have any money to purchase the necessities until dad received this first salary. Mom had then walked to the nearby food stuff store, which belonged to an unknown Muslim trader, and requested some goods on credit, to which the trader agreed. We lived in that town for a longer period, and that trader's family became our family friends.

Once I was devoid of a proper place for accommodation within the large space of Colombo city. Someone, a good Tamil friend, suggested a Muslim hostel in a large Islamic organization. Later on, when I went to inquire, the reply of the caretaker of the hostel was a negative one. Then anger started to rush over me as fire. Then I mentioned the name of an Islamic nobleman to whom I was then known. The rage led the warden to agree to offer me a place in the hostel, but it was not in the permanent section. However, a bed at the transit hostel stood for a fee of Rs.20 per day. Soon most of the inmates of the hostel (all of them were Muslims) became my good friends. All of us had good occupations in which to indulge at daytime. The nights we used to spend were jolly good nights. There were no drunkards at the hostel. However, some used to smoke until late in the nights (especially on Saturday nights). We were soon discussing the Holy Koran, Sufis, Muslim customs, and the habits of each province in Sri Lanka because there were traditional moors among us from down south.

It was the hill country Muslims with Sinhala surnames conferred on them during the times of Sinhala kings, and the other Muslims from the eastern province, and I as the sole Sinhala Buddhist

among them. It was during those deep discussions that I happened to speak to them about an Islamic Sufi mystic to whom I was personally known. During such deep discussions, someone said that he had heard through a tradition in which the prophet (Blessings and peace be upon him) had said, *If someone comes to a trader in request of some necessities on credit, the trader must agree to a certain extent.* (Did not that trader who offered necessities to our family act as his tradition suggested?)

Also in front of the hostel, was the residence of Mohideen Beig. Beig was a popular Kawali singer; in addition he was a Buddhist thematic songster in Sri Lanka. He was a popular playback singer in Sinhala cinema. During the Buddhist renaissance in Sri Lanka in the early twentieth century, the Muslims had sung thematic Buddhist songs on popular records and in the theater. There are hundreds of such recorded songs which still bring ecstasies to the Buddhists. According to the Islamic tradition, one hundred twenty-five thousand messengers brought the word of God to the world; perhaps they may be considering that Buddha the Gauthma as one of these messengers. According to Islam, a Muslim must respect other religions. During the mentioned Buddhist renaissance an American called colonel Henry Steel Alcott supported the movement very keenly.

However, let us discuss the Islamic mystic whom I mentioned to the Muslims in that hostel. I said to them that the mystic was the best Muslim that I have come across. In order to introduce this Sufi to you all, you should excuse me to read a passage that I once contributed to a volume published in tribute of an English woman writer in Sri Lanka.

*The Tide Press of a Dedicated Life: A Salute to Christine Spittle-Wilson* was the title of the volume. It was edited and published by Carl Muller and published by English Writers' Workshop, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Christine Wilson still lives. I heard her age is ninety-six. My contribution reads as follows: Aybowan Christine.

*It's morning with its flash of sun, and the circle of the day must turn. Then evening and colours deepen. But whether the chariot of the Sun moves in its ordained way or not, I have seen evening in many mornings—mornings I have spent at the Wadiya restaurant by the sea, where even Princess Anne strolled in of an evening to dine.*

*My morning 'evening' is Christine Wilson. I say this because age and maturity and the ripening of the years are evening. There is a necklace of red stones around her neck and her smile is kind and affectionate. She is the clouds touched with the golden light of evening, the sky turning flamingo pink, she is always my evening in morning.*

*Some time ago, I read her novel Bitter Berry with much enjoyment. It was the Sinhala translation. But long before that, I had borrowed the Sinhalese translation of her father's book on the Veddahs. To me and my schoolmates at Uva College, this was a special treat. Dr. R.L. Spittel's book was more real to us than all the other books we had to read.*

*We used to roam around Wales Park and stand beneath a huge jak tree to look at the girls who came by. There was an old man who walked through the park and along the road very often. He was "Jungle" Dissanayake—a retired police officer who had, when in service, gone deep into the jungles to arrest the Veddah chief, Tissahamy who was wanted for murder. When in the town, I never failed to visit the cemetery where Tissahamy's tomb was. The tombstone was erected by Dr. Spittel. An old relation told me that when Tissahamy was brought to the Badulla prison, he had a long white beard. The prison still stands beside Wales Park.*

*Christine comes to the Wadiya restaurant to supervise our English Writers' Workshop of which I am a member. She inspires me to dream of my days in old Uva. There is so much to be nostalgic about. I wish I can journey back to the tomb of Tissahamy. I wish I can once again stand beneath that big jak tree. Is it still there?*

*Once, my Sufi teacher who is now no more, asked me in his quavering Tamil: "Thambi, why can't a man live longer? See how long the trees can live." He was over a hundred years old then.*

*Traditionally, we Sri Lankans use a single word to greet one another—Ayubowan—may you live longer, may you be fine of complexion, fine in wisdom, fine in power and position, fine in personal wealth. So much benediction, but the first is so necessary...that you live long to enjoy the other blessings heaped on you in that one word.*

*I know, each time I see my evening in morning, that Christine has had the years to know and receive all such blessings and how she returns them in full measure to us at our work-shops by the sea. She is my many-hued evening. May the Buddhas in their countless comings and goings protect her.*

As said, our Sufi teacher was then more than hundred years old; every evening I sought his company. He used to sit on a bed. People used to sit on the floor around him. It was from the bed he administered all matters including his *Bayans*, or the preaching, and the rest of his advice. People who came to see him used to bring many eatables and fruits. However, he never partook of those eatables. Instead he used to distribute these to the people surrounding him. Though the Muslims do fast a whole month or more during the Ramazan period, can a human being live constantly without partaking of food? In that manner, our teacher, the Sufi mystic, was observing an around-the-clock fasting even beyond the allocated period of Ramazan. If you have come across the book *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Sri Paramahansa yogananda, you will find two people who abstained from partaking of food for their mere sustenance. One is an elderly Hindu woman. The other one is a catholic nun. Is it a phenomenon—the mystic's practice of abstinence from food? Once I asked him how he exists without food. He said he absorbs a subtle element for his sustenance. In 1971, an Americans invited him to the USA. In 1986 he passed away in Philadelphia. Branches of his fellowship are in many states in the USA.

He was known to us as Guru Bawa, or, His Holiness M.R. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. He was a revered sage and a holy man who emerged from the jungles of Sri Lanka in 1914. Little is known of his history prior to this time, except that he traveled extensively through the Middle East and India. Though he thought within the framework of Islamic Sufism, people from the Christian, Judaic and Hindu faiths came to him for their search for wisdom. His Holiness had the unique ability to distill the essential truth from all religions and to renew faith within the hearts of men. His holiness has also been the subject of numerous articles from newspapers and magazines including: *Time*, *Psychology Today*, and *The Harvard Divinity Bulletin*. I have translated a few of his books and one is already published.

Such are my impressions of myself in a Muslim community in Sri Lanka. I am not a theologian or a scholar who can analyze vivid aspects of Islam in a more esoteric manner. I myself am a common person who writes stories about common people in Sri Lanka. In other words, I am a lover of popular pavements. Even now, I sometimes greet an unknown Muslim trader along a pavement with a smile to start a conversation with him (one who is never been to a university, just like me). I can speak their common language, Tamil, which would cause the Muslim man and myself to enjoy our intimacies. He would know that I am a Sinhala Buddhist.

It was during the time of the Prophet Mohammed (Blessings and Peace be upon him) that a man used to be in a mosque and did his prayers in a ceaseless manner throughout the day without being engaged in an occupation. Upon hearing about him, the Prophet Mohammed (Blessings and Peace be upon him) advised him to engage in a profitable work in the daytime rather than depending on the earnings of his brother. Henceforth the man did his prayers after finishing his work to earn some money for himself. To my experience the said Muslims in Sri Lanka also engage in their occupations diligently in such a manner. I am talking about the common Muslims in Sri Lanka, but not the rich, the intellectuals. I sometimes wonder why the other Middle Eastern countries with so much prosperity never help these poor people to come up in their lives.

At last, when I was about to come to Iowa to attend this writer's workshop, it was a Muslim woman who helped me. She is a prominent English writer and a publisher in Sri Lanka. She wanted to offer me some warm cloths. It is a part of the heartwarming attitude of the Sri Lankan Islamic people. Even Hugh Ferrer, Associate Director of the International Writers'

Program, e-mailed me: *Thanks Jagath, Aameena is the best possible resource for what your time here will be like. We're so lucky she's there to help. Best, Hugh.*

Meanwhile, will you allow me to read an article that I contributed to a prominent newspaper in Sri Lanka sometime back? The title of the article is *Kutan Soru In December*. *Kutan Soru* means *eating together*. The article depicts the life pattern of some Muslims in Sri Lanka.

*Think of the famous painting The Picnic (Le D'ejeuner sur l'Herbe) by Edouard Manet (1832-1883), the French painter. The multiformity of the picnic's people enjoyment differs from country to country, region to region, community to community. The Muslim people in the Kalpitiya area also take part in an annual picnic session. This is a custom which their fathers and their forefathers have enjoyed. Their picnic season begins every year three weeks prior to Ramadan. This year too, in December, they will enjoy and celebrate their community picnic, the famous "Kuutan Shoru".*

*The two sides of the land that stretch from Palavi to Kalpitia are straddled by the Indian Ocean and the Putalam lagoon. This same land stretches to Kudiramalia point. Here one will find a spread of tiny isolated islands. "Kuutan Shoru" the community picnics are solemnized on these islands.*

*Such a picnic is confined only to men and on an appointed day soon after lunch the group will start proceeding to the island. Earlier they used to row canoes, but now they use speedy motor boats. In such a group, age limits may vary from old-people to teenagers. But not the children. Accompanying the party would be two or three fishermen with nets and with other paraphernalia for cooking including vegetables and drinking water. At the island the party will clear the surroundings and install a hut or a tent, while the fishermen would go for a catch. By the time they come back with their catch, the people who remained at the hut would be cooking vegetables and the rice.*

*Or else they would be preparing tea. The catch would be cooked according to the people's individual preferences. Then the night is spent with joviality. The following day a person will be sent off to the Kalpitiya town to bring bread for breakfast. Then cooking for the lunch will begin, while most members of the batch would be enjoying a sea bath. After lunch when evening descends tea would be served and the party would proceed back home.*

*When ladies are allowed to participate, the community picnics are held at coconut estates. A group of families would gather and go to an isolated coconut estate; there they would cook, enjoy the day, and come back home by evening. "Kuutan Shoru" is celebrated in homes too. But then it is not a picnic. A family would invite other families for lunch or for dinner. It is typical in such occasions to cook eighteen kinds of curries. At any Kuutan Shoru, the "Thovei", the traditional desert, is an outstanding feature. It is a preparation of Beling fruits with raw mango and sugar, which is delicious.*

*The point at where the Meoya discharged itself to the Puttalam lagoon is also an adorable place where people enjoy their picnics. Here plenty of fish is to be found and the campers would spend their nights with camp fires to ward off the bear and elephant who may appear from the jungle.*

*Today as in every other matter, the charm and the glamour of the traditional Kuutan Shoru is a bleak state among the people of Kalpitiya and Putalam. Terrorism has become a lion in the path by not allowing people to reach the islands freely. In the past the picnickers would carry guns to hunt suitable game. But now, it is not advisable.*

*After the celebration of Kuutan Shoru the people of Kalpitiya would faithfully start preparing themselves for Holy Ramadan. It was in such a Kuutam Shoru picnic that a teacher had mentioned his desire for a kind of sweetmeat, available in the Eastern province. A person among the group had been able to materialize the sweetmeat. From then onwards his ability to perform miracles became legendary. Until his recent demise he was performing miracles and curing people in Kalpitiya.*

*But that's another story from Kalpitiya.*

There is a saying that a cauliflower is nothing but a cabbage with a college education. The words are not mine. Those words are from the wit and wisdom of Mark Twain of this Mark Twain's country. The previously mentioned hard working Muslim person or the trader in the pavement and I may be mere cabbages grown in an unproductive soil. Perhaps I may leave this great country of opportunities, as a fully bloomed cauliflower after this great experience in Iowa. The people in a country must live together in harmony with each other and in community. I have never learned to hate a man or a woman belonging to another community. That is Buddha the Gauthma our parama guru's teaching. However, it is similar to the teachings of great Christ, the Prophet Mohammed (Blessings and peace be upon him), and the other world teachers like Krishna and Guru Nanak and Zoroaster to whom millions of people in the world respect.

Please forgive me, if I have uttered a wrong word during my expression. I believe I am still a

student, though my hair is in a period of snow clad middle November. I will experience real snow falling for the first time in my life. However, my hair became like snow some time back in Sri Lanka. Thank you for your generosity, soothing as falling snow.